

## The Kraussian Condition of the Medium

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As is the case with many essays on technology-based arts, Krauss's "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" is clearly marked by history; today we can easily see the multiplicity of paths that video art production has taken apart from its essential narcissism—even at the time when that essay was written. Krauss' modernist gaze takes the characteristics of early video performance—many of them a consequence of the technology of the moment—as *the* condition of the medium instead of as a historical emergence. Her interest in Lacanian psychoanalysis also pervades her reflections—another historical marker—and leads her to consider video portraits and closed-circuit devices in terms of mirror situations and narcissism.

Nevertheless, Krauss succeeds in finding a consistent group of works to analyze some particular relationships between the body and technology in the early days of video art. These pieces pose issues of intimacy, representation, the mediated Self, the perception of time, and the transparency of media as key subjects of the encounter of performance artists and video. They open up a new field of experimentation as well as a new set of aesthetic concerns.

One of Krauss's main theses holds that "video's real medium is a psychological situation," something different from other art media, which rely on an "object-state, separated from the artist's own being."<sup>1</sup> Film, for example, "has much more to do with the objective, material factors . . . [of] light projected through a moving strip of celluloid."<sup>2</sup> It is not clear why a light beam projected on a screen would be more objective and material than an electronic image contained inside a solid monitor, but this affirmation disregards a whole body of theories of the time, which acknowledged the many psychological situations pertaining to film—from retinal persistence (a psychological rather than optical mechanism) to identification with the movie's characters and the construction of film realism (i.e. the theories of Christian Metz).

Krauss deals with three key concepts, even though she sometimes does not call them by their names: representation, intimacy, and immediacy. When she describes some videos based on performances, she does it as though she was watching the actual performers doing their actions and not their *images* on a screen. She talks about Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, and Nancy Holt—a group of artist she knows very well, since they are part of the same visual arts circuit she belongs to—and not about characters. For her, they do not represent, so their videos cannot be considered proper representations (and here there is a difference with film that she does not stress). In these cases, video is transparent, a mere recording device. If video is a mirror for the artists, for the viewers it is a window, which allows them to witness the real world.

The recording situation is one of intimacy. The location of the artist in front of the camera, or between the camera and the monitor, creates a closed environment in which

he/she confronts his/her mediated Self, using video as a mirror. Krauss states, "the mirror reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object . . . For the object (the electronic equipment and its capabilities) has become merely an appurtenance."<sup>3</sup> In *Centers* (1971), by Vito Acconci, she acknowledges that "latent in [its] setup is the monitor that he is, himself, [Acconci] looking at," but adds that "there is no way for us to see *Centers* without reading that sustained connection between the artist and his double. So for us as for Acconci, video is a process that allows these two terms to fuse."<sup>4</sup> It is obvious that if there is a center, it is because there is a frame. Acconci is not only interacting with his image but also with the camera he is facing. The equipment is not a mere appurtenance here; it is an essential part of the video piece.

The same could be said about Bruce Nauman's inversion of the electronic image in *Revolving Upside Down* (1968), or Lynda Benglis's confrontation of her pre-recorded image in *Now* (1973), or Joan Jonas's set up of the framing of *Vertical Roll* (1972) so that the spoon she hits on the floor seems to be hitting the frame itself.<sup>5</sup> These artists do not perform for the camera; they perform *with it* (including its related devices).

Their work constitutes a new kind of performance art, one at the crossroads of the body and the media, which operates on the various mediations that emerge from it. Technology has become a partner; it is no longer a witness of actions and movements developed outside its realm. Necessarily, this situation has an impact on the auto-perception of the performer's body, image, consciousness, and self. Krauss' essay detected these transformations in their early stages and opened up a reflection that is active still today.

## References

Krauss, Rosalind. "Video: The Esthetics of Narcissism." *October* 1 (1976): 50–64.

## Notes

1. Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 57; Krauss, 52.
2. *Ibid.*, 52.
3. Krauss, 57.
4. *Ibid.*
5. In Krauss, 54; 55; 60.